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ABSTRACT

Many writing teachers and researchers, such as Mary Soliday, Paula Treichler, and Terry Dean, recognize the needs of their students to investigate matters of private and public concern directly affecting their learning. Collective research projects offer students and teachers what Ann Ruggles Gere calls a temporary semi-autonomous community in which to study topics of critical importance to them. Collective research makes new demands on both teachers and students, as one collective project with nontraditional students at Northern Essex Community College (Massachusetts) demonstrates. Because the instructor considers learning to generate research topics a critical process, work on the project began in the 4th week and extended into the 7th. As the class settled on the topic of "Children's Problems," students chose to work on subtopics related to their interests and experience; then, they chose groups of no more than four to investigate these subtopics. Refining and negotiating the subtopics continued through the 9th week of class, as students sent delegates to the library and to community agencies for source material. Negotiation of roles for group members continued from the 10th to the 13th week, with each student responsible for writing at least a two-page section of the group paper. Students decided to treat the oral presentations, held during the final class, as a mini-conference; many dressed up for the occasion. Student evaluations of each stage of this process suggest that they were generally positive about the collective research project. (Contains 25 references.) (TB)

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Collective Research at an Urban Community College

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During my first semester as a doctoral candidate, I became haunted by the story of a research paper C. Mark Hurlbert and Michael Blitz describe in "Resisting Composure":

> One of our students, Jerri, wrote a research paper by first listing fifteen passages quoted from books and articles dealing with her topic, on-the-job-training. She then devoted the rest of the paper to a series of very short paragraphs, each of which commented, often in very personal ways ("Studs [Terkel] should have talked to hookers in my neighborhood before he wrote this."), on one of the quotes. She concluded with a suggested reading list of texts that would, she said, talk about the topic better than she could. Jerri's paper does not argue by assembling a report on research, a paper arranged to support "pros" in order to defeat a "con." Instead, Jerri gathers a personal collection of moments of her reading of various texts and then points to the likelihood that her readers will need to move to still other texts. Her composition remains open at its "conclusion." (3)

Hurlbert and Blitz speculate that Jerri knew her paper lacked a thesis and did not follow accepted form, but that it was "somehow more intellectually useful and necessary to her than anything we might have required her to do." Reminding us that there are many composition teachers who are inadequately trained, or too overloaded or powerless to teach well, they observe that "unusual writings, such as Jerri's, never have the opportunity to alter the shape of our classrooms, schools, and society" (4). This paper is an attempt to make room for unusual writings and the possibilities that can develop in collective research with first-year composition students at an urban community college.

The uses of literacy, as Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and other cultural theorists have made clear, are multiple and

contested sites of cultural struggle in our first-year composition classes, and have led some teachers to reimagine their classrooms as "contact zones," "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt, 34). Hoggart mourns the fate of the scholarship boy who he saw as living a careful, lonely life between two worlds, and whose learning was limited to the "acquiring of facts rather than the handling and use of facts" (229). In Culture and Society, written in 1958, Williams traces the shifts in meaning of the word "culture" with his students, theorizing about the changes they observed and the implications for communication in a democratic society. Williams and his students saw the separation of culture into "high" and "low" as a way to divide society and exclude the working class from decision-making. Research in composition and literacy has deepened our knowledge of the history of writing instruction (Berlin, Connors, Faigley), the history of rhetoric (Bizzell and Herzberg), the history of writing groups (Gere), and the cultural practices surrounding the development of literacy (Heath, Scollon and Scollon, Scribner and Cole). But all of this transdisciplinary activity has had little effect on one of the most common required uses of literacy in composition: the research paper.

Kathleen McCormick argues that "the research paper functions almost exclusively as a conservative force, requiring by its very form that students believe in the general coherence of the self,

their topic, history, and the current culture" (212). Finding that the bulk of textbook instruction involves mechanical directions for library research, note-taking, outlining, and quoting and documenting sources, McCormick observes that the objectivity of the research paper writer is a constructed category, and notes that students are rarely encouraged to "move their analysis into the social and historical and thereby situate their own positions, as well as their sources" (215). The ideological stance of the texts she analyzed indicated that "topics that might enable students to begin to recognize and address seriously forms of injustice and discrimination that exist in our culture are all taboo" (216). McCormick also found that students learn little about how to read and analyze sources, and that students are encouraged to find an issue with a "clearly delineated mainstream position, but for which there is just enough controversy so their papers can look as if they constitute a decisive and personal choice for a position . . . The goal of their paper is to simplify and homogenize, not to study the tensions within a given field of inquiry" (218).

Yet compositionists and other teachers have found some important ways to use research in their classrooms to study the tensions between students' lived experience and their writing.

Mary Soliday uses literacy narratives (Frederick Douglass, Mike Rose, Alice Walker and others) to focus on issues of language acquisition to give "writers from diverse cultures a way to view their experience with language as unusual or strange"

(511). She explains that her students are "usually minority, immigrant, and working class," a reality that raises political concerns about "unthinkingly acculturating students into the academy and glossing over issues of difference in the classroom." Soliday also observes that diversified ways of reading canonical texts have been developed, but that multiple "ways of writing and imagining the self through writing" have not been fully explored. (512) After students have shared readings from Deborah Tannen, Richard Rodriguez, Michelle Cliff, Amy Tan, and Gloria Naylor, she asks them to generate a list of questions about language acquisition and to interview each other, peers, and family members. Examples she gives of student questions are, "Do you feel you are losing your own culture's language when you are learning a different language? How do you feel talking two or more languages? Why does sounding educated seem to people of color to be associated with being white? Why does black and white have to be an issue?" (516) This assignment helped students recognize the legitimacy of their hybridization and to explore, as one student put it, "how education is 'a process of remaking a person's life'" (518).

Paula Treichler's research in "A Room of Whose Own?" nests a series of classroom narratives to examine "the immense power of institutions to naturalize the experience they are organized to produce," (76) coming to the conclusion that "our commonplace pedagogical assumptions about students' abilities continue to focus on students rather than on the interaction between students

and their learning environment" (89). She finds that engaging students in a detailed microanalysis of five minutes of public dialogue or conversation offers them a multi-layered means of interpreting interaction by examining the immediate discursive context, the structural context, and institutional context, then moving back through the layers to the transcribed text.

Recognizing the need teachers have "to structure learning experiences that both help students write their way into the university and help teachers learn their way into student cultures," (23) Terry Dean addresses the issue of cultural transition by asking his students to compare "different cultural rituals (weddings, funerals, and New Year's) as a basis for introducing students to analytic academic discourse" (28), to respond in writing to Richard Rodriguez's "Aria," and to analyze (in writing) their attitudes towards writing (31). Other means he uses to help students learn and to learn about students include peer response groups, structured non-confrontational editing, small group discussions, class newsletters, an essay based on reading campus newspapers, and sharing anecdotes that raise identity issues and generate discussion.

These teacher/researchers recognize the needs of their students to investigate matters of private and public concern directly affecting their learning. Collective research projects offer students and teachers what Anne Ruggles Gere calls a temporary semi-autonomous community in which to study topics of critical importance to them by giving students space to identify

issues of mutual interest that are "intellectually useful and necessary" for them. What follows is a collective narrative of one collective research project in English Composition I at Northern Essex Community College.

Working with groups requires a different kind of knowledge from teachers than individual conferences or lecturing. Gere emphasizes giving students the authority to form their own groups in order to move them toward semi-autonomy. I prepare students by playing a name game with them at the beginning of the semester so they know who the other class members are, and publishing a class phone list to encourage them to communicate with each other. I also ask students to keep dialogue journals in which they write about the readings, what they are learning about writing, and events in their lives. Exchanging journals and responding in writing to others' entries becomes an important means of developing relationships between class members. We negotiate grading criteria at the beginning of the semester, and I ask students to sign a grading contract.

While collective research makes new demands on teachers, it also makes demands on students who are not accustomed to choosing a group topic, or negotiating research, writing tasks, and contrasting meanings. When I asked students in this class how they felt about working in groups on the research project, they commented: "Good, but some students take over and don't let others participate . . . Not everybody worked hard . . . Nervous, embarrassed and frustrated--never had anybody's grade depend on

mine . . . My group fell apart . . . I don't do well, my ideas conflict with others." Their responses reminded me of my own experiences writing three collaborative papers in graduate school: students have different strengths, some want a lot of control, and it is not as easy to envision a finished paper when several people are writing it.

Because I consider learning to generate research topics a critical process, work on this began in the fourth week and extended into the seventh. I explained that the completed project would be published as a class book and asked students to write possible topics on a slip of paper, then I typed and photocopied the list for students to discuss. Most of the topics concerned children; most students were parents, and most parents were women. We reduced the list by clumping related topics in groups, and students voted on one general topic, "Children's Problems," that described how the smaller topics were related. These included the effects of poverty on children, changes in the American family, children and schools, and the effects of violence on children.

Students took notes as we refined these, and chose to work on subtopics related to their interests and experience. I asked students to form groups of no more than four for each subtopic, and to discuss the roles each member would take during the research: researcher, writer, reviser, copy editor. Each group elected a secretary and developed a plan for group work.

When I asked students what they thought of using one topic,

they responded: "Students should have a chance to choose a topic of their liking . . . It depends on what the subject is about . . . Good--shared information . . . It cuts down on a lot of reading and research." I also asked them what suggestions they had for choosing the topic. They wrote: "As everyone had an input--everyone gets involved . . . Just keep involving the students when it comes to choosing topics for the research . . . This was a nice process . . . I liked the way we chose our topics . . . Good."

Asking students what suggestions they had for organizing groups taught me that most want some choice, but some need help in forming groups. Seven students preferred letting students choose who to work with, four would have preferred being assigned. Others commented, "I think you should assign the groups because some people might feel left out . . . The trouble with this is when people drop out or just don't do the work, it lends pressure to the others . . . If they know each other and want to work together its all right . . . Probably wouldn't have picked them." There were some students others did not want to work with, and I intervened to put one group together.

Refining and negotiating the substance of the subtopics continued though the ninth week of classes as students sent delegates to the library and to community agencies for source material. Other group members attended the Writing Center workshop on research papers and brought relevant information back to their group. As I held conferences with each group, I asked

students to think about how their subtopics related to the work of other groups and to share material they discovered that other groups might find useful. I coached students in documentation of sources as each new source was identified, teaching students how to cite such original research as a survey of local elementary school students' attitudes about gang behaviors, and interviews with parents.

Negotiation of roles for group members continued from the tenth to the thirteenth week, with each student responsible for writing at least a two-page section of the group paper. Editors took responsibility for discussing the order of the sections and composing transitions. Copy editors did sentence-level editing, and the groups chose one person to type the paper. Discussion of the content and questions about the changes were intense at this stage, with some groups dissatisfied with their source material and refocusing their paper to reflect what they had discovered. I collected the drafts during the eleventh week, responding to content and noting how to cite sources in-text.

Students indicated no concensus about what the hardest part of the project was, but their responses suggest the different ways group work stressed them: "Writing, writing! . . . Coming to class on time and putting my ideas together . . . Searching for data . . . Working with other people writing . . . Putting the paper together, revising it and getting it done on time . . . Keeping up with other people . . . Getting together with the group . . . Footwork and reading . . . Trying to figure out how

and where to make the citations."

As students prepared the final drafts for publication, I asked them what changes they would urge readers of the book to make as a result of their research. I wanted them to keep this question in mind as they planned their oral presentations, and settled on a title for the book and the order of the chapters. I told each student to be prepared to talk for five minutes and to think of this as the shy person's chance to speak in front of a sympathetic audience. For some, this was their first experience speaking to a group. During the last week of class, I asked each student to write a one-page self-evaluation of their role in the research project.

Students decided to treat the oral presentations, held during the final class, as a mini-conference. Many dressed in suits. I converted the teacher's desk into a reception table, moving it to the side of the room. Five chairs facing the class became the podium. Each group presented their findings, and generated new interpretations in explaining what they learned to the rest of the class. This was followed by audience questions and heated discussion which extended the class thinking beyond the writing. I gave each student a copy of the class book, along with their portfolio, when they came for their final grade conference.

When I asked students what they enjoyed about the research project, they wrote: "Working with individuals in the group . . . Getting more informed . . . It does make you like an expert on

the subject . . . Searching for information . . . I enjoyed doing the survey--I learned about the children in my area of town . . . Going to the library."

Responses from student self-evaluations demonstrate the tensions students experienced during this process. These are not the real names of the students.

Nora felt left out as the only English-speaking student in a group of Latinas. "A lot of the conversations that were held were in Spanish," she said, and she doubted the value of her contribution because she finished her work two weeks earlier than the others.

Janine learned that some topics are silenced. "I went to the library three different times. It was very hard finding information on this subject. No one wants to talk about it and that's the main problem."

Susan learned that fear is the biggest obstacle some students face in school, and made repeated efforts to encourage a frightened member of her group to stay in the class.

Maria, seven months pregnant when she began the course, found support when she had to be hospitalized. "I like the way the class was taught . . . But the most important thing I learned was that there's still people out there that are willing to help others, just like they did with me during this semester in my classes. The research paper taught me that we as parents are not communicating enough with our children and I note that our school system needs to be revised. We need more day care centers and

our special education is not really working out for kids and we need something to change it."

Diane was elected secretary of her group and "made sure that the work was getting done on time." But she noted, "I would have preferred to do my own research paper but this was a great experience to work together."

Donna found using InfoTrac a big improvement over looking through the card catalogue.

Rafael, actively involved in raising his nephews, wrote, "In a way, I got very concerned with many of the problems children and teenagers face today because we as parents do not face their problems . . . By evaluating myself is like taking concern of how we as parents are not communicating with our children. Instead we are letting schools take important decisions in important issues about our children's lives that we should be responsible for."

Charlayne explained, "The group I chose was family and culture, because I believed that I could contribute and relate to this topic . . . When everyone completed their paper, I volunteered to type it. I never realized that this paper was so long. Each student had to contribute three pages, but our group had a book--twenty-two pages."

A.L., Vietnamese father of two, worked at night for an electronics firm so he could take courses during the day. He wrote, "The group research paper, I think it is a good idea. Students in the group share their ideas and I think it is saving

time."

Noemi was open about her ambivalence about group research. "We discussed as a group what to use as a title and it took us forever to reach a sort of agreement, which to me was not too satisfactory. I felt that there was much more we could have done as a group towards the creative part of the project . . . I'm not crazy about working as a group. I will do it, but I'd rather work on my own."

Karen felt she learned a lot during the research process. "It really surprised me how many homeless youths are out there today and it is a scary thing to know what the statistics are. Being part of a research group seemed much easier to me. As long as we communicated with each other about everything, we headed in the right direction . . . Even though I did lots of research on my topic, I only managed to put two pages together."

Scott found the project frustrating because he couldn't locate the information he expected to find, "but I managed to get everything I needed to get my part of the job done. If I had another choice in my research paper I would want to use something a little more interesting. Something like the Holocaust or World War II or how rock and roll influences kids. Anyway, what is done is said to be finished without end."

And Carl felt his research contributions "were not taken or used as I would have liked them to be, but the paper came out great." He reorganized the rough draft and copy edited the final draft.

This article, like Jerri's research paper, remains open at its "conclusion," or, as Scott put it, it is "finished without end" because such a project can never really be completed. The following passages from the class book indicate the level at which students became engaged in theorizing and the openings that remain:

> Our children are our means of ensuring that our culture and heritage are carried on after we are gone, but without the proper care and nurturing that they need to exist, that will be only a dream to be reached by some, while others are ignored.
>
> Parents and children should try to get their kids involved at school with children of other ethnic groups including whites and not retreat to one particular culture . . . As a minority person, I have learned that the way a child is brought up and the things that he or she is taught has a great bearing on the attitude of that child as an adult. Though we may believe that our tradition is unique, we also need to know that we are a unique nation with vast differences among people which makes communication sometimes difficult with each other.
>
> In my own experience, survivors of abuse will most likely need treatment and care for much of their lives.
>
> In my opinion, the high cost of day care is more than many parents can afford. High quality day care also is the number one concern of many parents.
>
> I think more schools should adopt multi-age classes and tutoring as well as multi-age grouping before, during and after school. Professionals agree that parents need to be involved, and some agree with me that the student must be a part of the setting up of his or her program.
>
> American schools will do a better job and test scores could increase if teachers expected and demanded more of their students.
>
> What turns children onto gang violence? In trying to answer this question, I conducted a survey in two third grade classrooms and two sixth grade classrooms. I found that although the third graders are aware of

> gangs, most at this age did not want to join. While the sixth graders who were 11, 12, and 13 year old adolescents would like to join a gang, twelve of them are already in a gang. A lot of the youths said that if they belonged to a gang that they would commit crimes.
>
> At the high school where I worked as a secretary for more than five years, the problems these kids had were much more devastating. Eighty percent of the student body came from poor families that never had anything and probably never will . . . I witnessed programs that poured into the school to help the poor and disadvantaged, and many often failed.
>
> My personal experience with people on drugs has included members of my own family. It's very depressing, but I learned that when we get together as a family and work to educate youngsters, we have a better chance of making positive change.
>
> I must admit that not every child caught up in the system is a criminal, but it's time to understand that every young person does not think alike . . . People have become frustrated with the issue of punishment for minors . . . It is not that we as a society should not have compassion for some of these children; it is that we should not behave as blind people continuously being struck from the same side, immobilized, feeling the pain, and not doing anything about it.

Ira Shor tells us, "Education is much more controllable if the teacher follows the standard curriculum and if the students act as if only the teacher's words count." I could have taught students to put together the traditional research paper--limiting their options by providing them with a topic, gathering sources to put on reserve at the library, and coaching them to imitate scholars in our discipline. But Shor also shows us why such control fails us: "If teachers or students exercised the power to remake knowledge in the classroom, then they would be asserting their power to remake society" (10). Without the possibility of remaking our communities, we lose the ability to imagine better futures.

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